



**REMEMBRANCE AND REFLECTIONS ON LIBERATION:  
OVERTURNING OURSELVES AND OUR OPPRESSION**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**A**s the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Nguzo Saba 2015 Conference approaches (September 25-27), celebrating the founding of our organization Us and the introduction of the Nguzo Saba (The Seven Principles) and Kawaida philosophy, it is good to read and reflect on the developmental course of our thought and practice since the 60s and reaffirm their enduring and current relevance for engaging critical issues of our times. The following are excerpts from a 1972 article titled "Overturning Ourselves: From Mystification to Meaningful Struggle" which I published in the *Black Scholar* during my political imprisonment on trumped up charges. This and other essays written in the *Black Scholar* during this period were subsequently published in my book titled *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis* in 1978 by Kawaida Publications. A new 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition will be published by the University of Sankore Press and be available at the conference. It is both a message and model of establishing free space in captivity and of defiant resistance, as conscious and political prisoners say, "from behind enemy lines".

Read into revolution what you will, it is essentially a question of enduring and expanding, of transforming discontent into organized and effective action, defying and defeating the enemy and building *alternative solidarities* that assure the defense of our interests and the development of our potential. And regardless of what was thought or hoped, prayed for or promised, revolution and liberation will not be handed to us by history; nor can it be slo-ganized, talked or televised into existence. Neither can we, disoriented by frustration or imagined defeat, allow ourselves the luxury and lethargy of withdrawal. Our commitment must be continuous; our moral fiber and internal strength great enough to sustain us in our struggle to turn sound and fury into substance

and fulfillment. The Year of the August Revolt, 1965, marked a turning point in our struggle. It altered the fundamental character of the Movement and suggested an alternative way of dealing with oppression and its attendant problems. But it and the period after it was more defensive than developmental, acquired the aspect of protest rather than programmatic change, and finally became bogged down in subjective formulations and empty acts rather than becoming a catalyst for a broader and more definitive struggle.

Let us look at ourselves seven years after. We are weak in crucial areas, scattered, coopted and corrupted, disillusioned, *in exile* and *in captivity*, conscious of our needs without the means to satisfy them, meditating and expanding on what might have been. *But this is check, not checkmate and if we will it, we still can win!* It is said that one has to play the hand dealt by history, but this is only half true. For we only have to play the hand history has dealt until we can reestablish the rules and deal from a deck of our own choice. It is naive politically and intellectually to imagine us without contradictions, without setbacks and periodic impasses. Every people has contradictions and weaknesses as well as strengths, revolutionary as well as reactionary elements and we are not in this aspect different. Each struggle or successful revolution offers lessons and raises questions as it solves them, and leaves more questions for other generations and peoples to struggle with and solve. So it is with our struggle,

But in order to grasp the lessons learned, consolidate and keep our gains, we must engage in constant reassessment both of the internal and external conditions of our struggle. We cannot afford to allow our oppressor to interpret our history, pass political judgment on the effectiveness of our acts or contentions and disguise his racism and repression as

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proof of the futility of creative struggle. And regardless of what is written or said or felt in silence, the period of struggle between 1965 and now had and has its meaning and message and it is up to us to assess and absorb it so we can transcend it and promote transformation on a higher level.

One of the most damaging debates that occurred during this time was the one that emanated from the false distinction between revolutionary nationalism and cultural nationalism. Revolution, like national liberation, as Cabral says, is an act of culture, an organized political expression of a given culture. And if, as has been admitted in revolutionary circles around the world, nationalism is a precondition for revolution, it is culture that is the primary vehicle for achieving this national awareness and commitment. But culture was confused conveniently or ignorantly with song and dance on one level and manifestations of African origins on another. It was not conceived as the crucible in which the struggle took form and the context in which it ultimately succeeded and blossomed into continuous reconstruction.

When we talk of cultural revolution, we're talking essentially about cultural reconversion, the conscious and programmatic restructuring of attitudes and relationships that aid us in our aspiration for national liberation. We are recognizing and responding to the fact that the first resistance in any national struggle is cultural resistance and that as we said elsewhere, the crucial struggle is to win the minds of our people, for if we lose this struggle we cannot hope to win the political one. Also, what we were and are about is the task and responsibility of building a national culture, the culture of a nation, conscious of and committed to its role and responsibility in its own liberation and its contribution to human his-

tory, in a word, a collective vocation of nation building.

Cultural revolution is a record of successive adaptations and adjustments reflecting a culture's flexibility and capacity to expand and grow. Culture cannot remain static, it must produce, direct and determine the intensity and level of struggle even as struggle acts in a mutually supportive role of producing culture and heightening its level. Moreover, culture must and does give a moral dimension to the struggle, establishes rules and systems of association and behavior as well as resolving contradiction among its people and harmonizing diverse yet interdependent interests. And the stress on the moral element of the struggle is essential, for without it we turn on ourselves, arguing abstracts and forgetting or frowning upon the needs of the people. Power, undefined and not placed in its proper perspective, cannot be advocated, for it not only frightens people unfamiliar with power, but raises serious questions concerning the use of it once it's obtained.

**G**iven these conditions, our people will deny us support for fear once we obtain our objective, we will use it to impose our own brand of oppression. In order to create a new faith, a new positive force for our people to support and promote, we must emphasize not the physical or pure political force, but rather the moral and humanistic basis of our struggle, authority and legitimacy. The worth of any act or idea must ultimately and always be determined by its moral and social benefit to our people as a whole, not to distinct and contending groups. For national liberation requires political and moral unity, a confluence of all aspects of our culture, tying together each group and level of our people into a knot that will not break or unravel in the stress and strain of constant struggle.

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